

Challenging the paradigm: rethinking Aboriginal art within Australia's art history

Review of:

Susan Lowish, *Rethinking Australia's art history: The challenge of Aboriginal art*, New York & Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2018, 236 pp., 18 col. plates, 61 b. & w. illus., £115.00 [AUD242.00] hdbk, £20.50 [AUD34.55] ebk ISBN 9780815374176 (hbk), ISBN 9781351049986 (ebk)

Catherine De Lorenzo

In her ambitious *Rethinking Australia's art history: The challenge of Aboriginal art*, Susan Lowish tackles an issue that sits at the very epicentre of art historical thinking in Australia, but one that until now has eluded the kind of singular attention it receives in this timely book. Much Australian art history and art historiography has sought to acknowledge and account for the transformation of the field as a result of the flourishing of Aboriginal art and art exhibitions, especially since the late 1980s. International scholars who are interested in contemporary challenges to the Eurocentric origins of art history and who are familiar with Australian art historical contributions to the field¹ or some of the major international exhibitions in recent decades,² will be aware that art historians and curators have sought to grapple with the challenges and opportunities provided by Aboriginal art. In this book Lowish seeks to investigate early thinking on the topic in the belief that it is better to acknowledge than ignore colonialist ways of thinking about Aboriginal art and culture, for it allows a more informed critical appraisal of both Aboriginal art and of art history today.

Lowish is aware of the art historiographical context in Australia, the foundational role played by Bernard Smith in mapping a (partial) history of Australian art, and his indebtedness to the idea of periodisation in art history.³ To define a period, for Smith, was

¹ See the whole issue of *Journal of Art Historiography* 4, June 2011. See also some Australian contributions to Jaynie Anderson, ed., *Crossing Cultures: Conflict, Migration and Convergence. The Proceedings of the 32nd International Congress in the History of Art (Comité International D'histoire De L'art, CIHA), 13-18 January 2008*, Melbourne: The Miegunyah Press, 2009; Jaynie Anderson, ed., *The Cambridge companion to Australian art*, Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2011; Ian Mclean, ed., *How Aborigines Invented the Idea of Contemporary Art: Writings on Aboriginal Contemporary Art*, Sydney and Brisbane: Power Publications with the Institute of Modern Art, 2011; Ian Mclean, *Rattling Spears: A History of Indigenous Australian Art*, London: Reaktion Books, 2016; Joanna Mendelsohn, Catherine De Lorenzo, Alison Inglis and Catherine Speck, *Australian Art Exhibitions: Opening our Eyes*, Melbourne: Thames & Hudson, 2018.

² A small example being Bernhard Lüthi, ed., *Aratjara: Art of the First Australians: traditional and contemporary works by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists*, Dusseldorf: Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen and Cologne: DuMont Buchverlag, 1993; Anne Gray, Ron Radford, and Kathleen Soriano, eds., *Australia*, London Royal Academy of Arts, 2013; Stephen Gilchrist, *Everwhen: The Eternal Present in Indigenous Art from Australia*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Art Museums/Yale University Press, 2016.

³Bernard Smith, *Australian Painting*, London: Oxford University Press, 1962.

fundamental to art historical practice.⁴ It's probably worth expanding a little on Smith's Australian art historical paradigm because, though it has been consistently contested since the 1980s, it remains a reference point for much scholarship and for Lowish's book.⁵

In 1962 when Bernard Smith wrote *Australian Painting*, he was mindful of both European precedents and the need to ensure 'that his reputation as an art historian was strong enough to outweigh his ambivalent status as an ex-member of the Communist Party...[in this] first work of academic art history on Australian art'.⁶ In 1962 the assumption that art, or at least Australian art, was essentially painting, and that these paintings were by non-indigenous Australians exclusively, was unremarkable. Equally unremarkable was Smith's sense of history. Smith makes use of a teleological structure (with chapters bearing biblical titles such as Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus and Rebirth) and imagines a future with 'masterpieces which fashion from the Australian experience of life something of lasting value for the whole field of human experience'.⁷ Smith's Australian art history, which stretches from a proud European past to a future that had yet to witness the apotheosis of an internationally-recognised Australian art, echoes the 'progressive' trajectories of evolutionism. The irony is that it would be another eighteen years before Smith would reconsider Australian culture, as best a European might try, through an 'Aboriginal' filter.⁸ It was roughly thirty years before the apotheosis of which he dreamed in 1962 became apparent.

Even as he was writing his book things were changing in Australia. As Lowish intimates, in the twenty years prior Smith's publication anthropologists and ethnographers were active, with Leonhard Adam in Melbourne,⁹ Fred McCarthy and A.P. Elkin in Sydney,¹⁰ Elkin's students Ronald and Catherine Berndt in Sydney then Perth,¹¹ and Charles

⁴ Towards the end of his life, Smith used periodisation to rethink the history of Modernism in *Modernism's History: A Study in Twentieth Century Art and Ideas*, Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 1998. He later revised and abridged the argument into *The Formalesque: A Guide to Modern Art and Its History*, South Yarra, Vic.: Macmillan, 2007.

⁵ The first major critique of Smith's art history was Ian Burn, Nigel Lendon, Charles Merewether and Ann Stephen, *The Necessity of Australian Art: An Essay about Interpretation*, Sydney: Power Publications, 1988.

⁶ Heather Barker and Charles Green, 'Australian Painting 1788-1960 (1962)', in *Antipodean Perspective: Selected Writings of Bernard Smith*, eds Rex Butler and Sheridan Palmer, 130-136, Clayton, Vic.: Monash University Publishing, 2018.

⁷ Smith, *Australian Painting*. ix.

⁸ Bernard Smith, 1980 *Boyer Lectures: The Spectre of Truganini*, Sydney: The Australian Broadcasting Commission, 1980.

⁹ Leonhard Adam, *Primitive Art Exhibition*, Melbourne: Public Library, Museums and National Gallery, 1943; Robyn Sloggett, 'Has Aboriginal art a future?' Leonhard Adam's 1944 Essay and the Development of the Australian Aboriginal Art Market', *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 18:2, 2015, 167-83.

¹⁰ Frederick D. McCarthy, *Australian Aboriginal Decorative Art*, Sydney: Australian Museum, 1938; Charles Barrett and R.H. Croll, *Art of the Australian Aboriginal*, ed. With a Foreword by A.P. Elkin, Melbourne: Bread and Cheese Club, 1943; A.P. Elkin, Catherine H. Berndt and Ronald M. Berndt, *Art in Arnhem Land*, Melbourne: Cheshire, 1950.

¹¹ [R.M. and C.H. Berndt], the Australian National Research Council and the Department of Anthropology, Sydney University, *Arnhem Land Art (Northern Territory of Australia)*, Sydney: David Jones' Art Gallery, 17-29 October 1949; Ronald M. Berndt and Catherine H. Berndt, *The Art of Arnhem*

P. Mountford in Adelaide,¹² contributing to the field. Then from 1957 to 1960 there were a flurry of exhibitions on Aboriginal art. Although they were shown in art, rather than science, museums, they came too late to shift the general thrust of Smith art historical narrative.¹³ Today, the fields of making, curating and writing about Aboriginal art is a defining aspect of Australian art.

It must be said that the changes towards Aboriginal art that occurred in the late twentieth century stemmed not from reforms in (visual) anthropology in the 1970s or fresh perspectives from the 'new art history' of the 1980s. From the late 1970s Aboriginal painting, photography, film, dance, architecture, poetry, theatre and fiction redefined Australian art thanks to the enormous boost to all the arts including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art by the Whitlam government in the early 1970s and Aboriginal activism for self determination.

It is this transformation, unimaginable to the handful of art historians practising in Australia in the early 1960s, that begs for a critical art historiography. Given the indelible European modes of thinking that have informed the discipline, no expanded model of Australian art history could simply weave into the narrative the previously-excluded Aboriginal art. In other words, a revisionist art history would not suffice. In her book Lowish rejects a slightly amended model of art history for a fresh look at the problem. With an archivist's curiosity about any document of relevance to the topic, she selects all manner of texts – scholarly and government reports, by field workers and armchair specialists – each purporting to consider 'Aboriginal art'.

In her Introduction, Lowish makes a number of key arguments for the book. One is that she is more focussed on the literature on Aboriginal art than on the art itself. Lowish does not shy away from the fact that much of the literature reflects the imperial and evolutionist thinking of the day. But she examines it closely because 'there is an important responsibility to be truthful about the past' (5). The reason it's important to consider the material is that these formative and often racist ideas 'remain with us in the present day' (2). If we understand where the ideas come from and how they became normalised as 'truisms' about Aboriginal art and culture then we might be more willing and capable to question received opinions.

Land. An Exhibition of Australian Aboriginal Art. Arnhem Land Paintings on Bark and Carved Human Figures, Perth: Anthropology Section of the University of Western Australia and the Western Australian Museum, 1957; Ronald M. Berndt, ed., *Australian Aboriginal Art*, Sydney: Ure Smith, 1964.

¹² Charles P. Mountford, *The Art of Albert Namatjira*, Melbourne Bread and Cheese Club, 1944; Charles P. Mountford and the American-Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land, *Records of the American-Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land 1: Art, Myth and Symbolism*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1956; Charles P. Mountford, *Aboriginal Art*, [London]: Longmans, 1961.

¹³ The Berndts curated *The Art of Arnhem Land. An Exhibition of Australian Aboriginal Art. Arnhem Land Paintings on Bark and Carved Human Figures* (December 1957-January 1958) at the Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth; Charles Mountford *The Art of Arnhem Land and Aboriginal Bark Painting* (1960) at the Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide; and Tony Tuckson *Australian Aboriginal Art: Bark paintings, carved figures, sacred and secular objects: an exhibition arranged by the state art galleries of Australia* (1960-61), Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney followed by a national tour. See also Catherine De Lorenzo, 'The Hang and Art History', *Journal of Art Historiography*, 13, December 2015, 1-17.

I shall summarise her key arguments chapter by chapter before making some general comments on the book as a whole.

Chapter 1, *Writing a History of Encounters*, gives an overview of some of the recent literature on Aboriginal art. Where anthropologists such as Howard Morphy want a narrative that prioritises Aboriginal art practice (so requiring a fieldworker of sorts), art historians, such as Andrew Sayers, have emphasised the need for a reflective shared history. Any scholar working in the field in Australia knows these different approaches run deep within the different disciplines. It's a difference that is a bit perplexing given that it was the art historian Meyer Schapiro who in 1953 first published his essay on 'Style' in the anthology *Anthropology Today: An Encyclopaedic Inventory*.¹⁴ Schapiro triggered a spate of anthropological analyses of style in the art of first nations around the world, including Australia. Within a few years Ronald Berndt in Western Australia made use of Meyer's methodology. However forty years later Howard Morphy, Australia's most important anthropologist writing on Yolgnu art from Eastern Arnhem Land, expressed regret that a formalist mode of analysis from art history had effectively constrained anthropological analyses of art – notwithstanding that from the 1970s onwards formalism played only a minor role within the spectrum of methodologies available to art historians.¹⁵ Lowish briefly canvasses various strategies by art historians, whether considering the intrinsic scope of the discipline (e.g. Donald Preziosi) or figuring out ways to co-examine Aboriginal art within the discipline of art history (e.g. Andrew Sayers). In the end she spells out her own methodology, which is to take up Bernard Smith's idea of a period style and to select for her subject any and all 'writing about the art', no matter the discipline of the author. The period in this instance commences with the founding of the British colony in 1788 and concludes in 1929 with the first major exhibition of Aboriginal art, in Melbourne. This periodic stricture allows for a clear focus to her research. It also enables Lowish to offer an expanded model of art history by virtue of the fact that many of the texts come from well outside the discipline. Lowish seems fundamentally uninterested in the implicit antagonisms between anthropologists and art historians/ curators over who is better placed to exhibit and write about Aboriginal art. She is also aware that Indigenous voices are all but missing from the written sources: time and again Indigenous Australians are spoken for. A close examination of the foundational texts reveals the scientific then aesthetic thinking on the subject.

Chapter 2, on *Exploration and 'Discovery'*, looks at the writings of seven or eight early European visitors to Australia and their assumptions about what constituted art. For expeditionists/officials such as Sir George Grey writing in 1841, there was the influential disbelief that such 'barbarous' people as Australian Aborigines could possibly have made some of the wondrous art of the East Kimberley region in NW Australia. Lowish then documents numerous secondary sources who underscored these ideas with the notion of 'degeneracy' (where a once-fine people somehow lapsed into a puerile world). Chapter 3, *Searching for the Origin of Art*, interweaves both ideas of art as imitating nature, and the consolidation of evolutionary theories of art. Neither of these mindsets predisposed the

¹⁴ Meyer Schapiro, 'Style', in *Anthropology Today: An Encyclopaedic Inventory*, ed. A.L. Kroeber, 287-312. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953.

¹⁵ Two of Howard Morphy's many texts on Aboriginal art are *Aboriginal Art*, London: Phaidon, 1998; and *Becoming Art: Exploring Cross-Cultural Categories*, Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2008.

'experts' to recognise much merit in Aboriginal art, given that it was thought their makers constituted the bottom rung of an increasingly sophisticated ladder of civilisation. Assuming that Indigenous Australians were incapable of engaging with the level of conceptual and emotional refinement required of great art, most authors from the mid-nineteenth century damned Aboriginal art for lacking European sophistication and damned it even more so when Aboriginal artists replicated European modes of drawing. If engravings and paintings on rock or wood were thought of as 'child-like', those done with pen or ink on paper were ultimately deemed 'inauthentic' and beneath contempt. In this chapter Lowish returns to Grey's dismissive response to the sacred art of the Ngarinyin people in the Kimberley region, showing how it is reprised in many scholarly texts over time, even up to 1994. Evidently, it remained easier to replicate Grey's ignorance than consult the Ngarinyin people themselves. It was not until 2000 that the nail in the coffin of the Grey legacy came with the multi-lingual publication *Gwion Gwion: Secret and Sacred pathways of the Ngarinyin Aboriginal People of Australia*.¹⁶

From the outset it is clear that the central character in the book is the anthropologist Walter Baldwin Spencer (1860-1926): his importance is signalled early on, and many of the earlier chapters go into depth on the changing intellectual currents so that Spencer's intellectual formation, initiatives and legacies are understood. Chapter 4 continues with contextual debates about aesthetics in science, this time from the late 1890s and so contemporaneous with the early publications by Spencer and his co-researcher Francis Gillen. Interest in the art of Aborigines continued to grow in the late nineteenth century. By this stage in the text readers are familiar with, if not seduced by, the central tropes of imitation, origin, and authenticity. This allows them to appreciate Lowish's identification of any considered insight on the unfolding concept of Aboriginal art. W.E. Roth, for example, who worked in north-west-central Queensland as an anthropologist and government-appointed Protector of Aborigines, while not immune to the Eurocentrism of the day, did at least offer some interpretations based on discussions with the Aborigines themselves. His contemporary, Thomas Worsnop, a town clerk in Adelaide, suggested that the evident artistic skill was no so much imitative as conceptual: it came from the 'Australian aboriginal [sic] mind' (85). The first Anglican bishop of Ballarat, Samuel Thornton, credited 'the black of to-day...[with] his own sense of beauty in form and colour, and craves to give it expression in the decoration of his person, his weapons, and his utensils...(89). Although each in itself was modest, together these incremental insights gradually altered the status quo. Not all had the imagination to think beyond received opinion: John Mathew, for example, is introduced as one who reverted to the Grey's 1841 denial of Indigenous authorship. As Lowish shows, these arguments are all tangled and largely arrogant. All perpetuate some of the earliest perceptions as if they were incontestable verities. Luckily, some had the nous to dialogue with Aboriginal people and to recognise that as fellow humans there must be similar impulses for individual and communal creativity and expression.

Chapter 5, Evolutionists and Australian Aboriginal Art, focuses on the uptake of evolutionary theory into art writing, whether that be an entry on Art in an encyclopaedia or an essay by Ruskin. It examines the integration of non-European art, including Aboriginal

¹⁶ Jeff Doring, ed., *Gwion Gwion : Ngarjno, Ungudman, Banggal, Nyawarra : Dulwan Mamaa = Secret and Sacred Pathways = Geheime und Heilige Pfade = Chemins Secrets et Sacres*, Koln: Konemann, 2000.

art, into the increasingly popular category of 'decorative art'. Three authors in the late 1890s who best informed the wider world about Aboriginal art and design were Henry Balfour, Alfred C. Haddon and Ernst Grosse. Perhaps the most interesting of these was Grosse (1862-1927) who, as a young professor in Freiburg with an interest in aesthetics and society, became the first European to propose a more holistic understanding of Aboriginal art. Lowish describes his *The Beginnings of Art* (1897) as 'one of the most important documents in the history of writing on Aboriginal art produced in the nineteenth century' (105) because it looked beyond objects to encompass personal decoration, ornament, representation, dance, poetry and movement (107). Scholars such as Grosse in Germany and Balfour at the University Museum in Oxford were dependent on collections and publications, especially illustrated publications, for their knowledge. Their writings are evidence that the literature was shifting from eye-witness records to secondary discourse, even as this discourse retained many of the hallmarks of colonialism.

All of this is relevant to the significant scholarship conducted by Baldwin Spencer, the central focus of Chapter 6 and the gravitational pull for the other chapters. The fundamental question driving the research for the book appears to be: to what extent was Spencer's outlook shaped by earlier and contemporary studies of Aboriginal art and culture? Although Spencer's writing was at times 'prosaic' with an 'overall lack of detail', and although he continued to espouse evolutionist modes of thinking, he did take seriously the production of art in many forms. Spencer perpetuated the idea that symbolic meanings could not be ascertained because they had been long forgotten, yet he also expressed something of the aesthetic pleasure he derived from Aboriginal art. His books were acclaimed worldwide so the distillation of these modes of thinking deserves the emphasis given to him in this study.

The book all but concludes with a chapter on collections and exhibitions of Aboriginal art exhibitions, especially from the mid nineteenth century to 1929. These displays were often driven by typological determinants, with arrangements of spears, baskets, woomeras, bark paintings, drawings, etc tending to be massed together in such a way as to make a crowded salon hang in an art museum seem spacious by comparison. These typological displays first appeared in international exhibitions, such as the Melbourne Exhibition (1854) and the Sydney International (1879). They continued well into the twentieth century in museums collections in Australia and overseas, with a recent (2009) rehang in the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford proving that the didactic mode of display has not yet bitten the dust. Given the period under discussion, the exhibitions were all in science museums. These displays collectively defined a kind of nether world shaped as much by scientific observation as by imperialism with a reliance on utilitarian and European narratives. This reviewer was disappointed the *Australian Aboriginal Art* exhibition of 1929 at the National Museum of Victoria was introduced without a full discussion. Held three years after Spencer's death, the 1929 exhibition used photography and some casts to remind the city viewers of the rock art around Australia that constituted *in situ* 'aboriginal "art galleries"'.¹⁷ The 'finest decorations, [found] on weapons and sacred objects' were described

¹⁷ [Charles Barrett and A.S. Kenyon for], Trustees of the Public Library, Museums, and National Gallery of Victoria, *Australian Aboriginal Art: Issued in Connexion with the Exhibition of Australian Aboriginal Art*; Melbourne: H.J. Green, Government Printer, 1929. The exhibition drew on collections around the country.

as 'magic truly: no "Art for Art's sake"', and bark painting from the Northern Territory as 'intellectual realism'.¹⁸ The Museum saw nothing unethical about including copies by white artists of rock art in an attempt to offset the museum's collection of weapons and painted barks, for its aim was to present 'a popular description of Australian primitive art' and in so doing to attract new audiences for Aboriginal art and culture. Significantly, the illustrated catalogue with essays by the naturalist and journalist Charles Barrett and engineer, ethnologist and historian A.S. Kenyon, ran into multiple editions after WWII. The 1929 exhibition would have been worth exploring in some detail as it demonstrates a popular interest in the subject and provides a springboard for a sequel to Lowish's study.

The reader recognises in Lowish's book an unfolding historical linearity but one with plenty of stray threads that weave backwards, forwards and sideways in order to keep in mind the complexities, layerings and multiple contexts for any idea. Lowish says at one point, 'This chapter pursues circuitous and often web-like connections that link people, places and things' (155). In other words, changing paradigms trigger new insights; there can be no singular interpretation of the source material. Barrett and Kenyon in 1929, like Howard Morphy and Philip Jones in more recent decades, brought an historiographical rigour to the field of Aboriginal art.¹⁹ Lowish's historiographical contribution is to focus on what might henceforth be seen as the foundational period of European engagement with the idea of 'Aboriginal art'. This strategy brings clarity to a complex and unfolding field. If much of this source material is demeaning and uniformed, the same cannot be said of Lowish's analysis, which effectively provides a basis for further research into the period she defines, and beyond.

I had a few quibbles with the book. Firstly, the ambition to cover one hundred and thirty years, including recent scholarship in the field, has meant that probity is at times constrained. Despite a willingness to editorialise, especially when referencing racist words and modes of thinking, in general Lowish steers an 'objective analysis' course through the minefield of disciplinary and cultural interpretations. While often a wise and pragmatic strategy, at sometimes it disappoints. For example, on p. 101 Lowish clearly signals the importance of 'how evolutionary theory influenced art writing', yet the plentiful tacit evidence for this claim remains under-investigated. Constraint is also exercised in the account of the 2009 revamped Pitt Rivers display. Here Baldwin Spencer's drawings are placed front and centre within cabinets labelled 'Aboriginal Art' (see Pl. 18). To her credit, Lowish notes that the decision to present 'Aboriginal art as part of the history of anthropology... cement[s] the relationship between Aboriginal art, museums and empire' (176). But the conservative curatorial strategy that reprises the didactic overcrowding of yore (yet with little room for art from the south-east of the continent), cries out for a robust critique of disciplinary resistance to new modes of thinking and presentation. A brief reference to contemporary museological practice that sees artists, especially First Nation artists, release such objects from the colonial and evolutionary modes of thinking behind

¹⁸ [Barrett and Kenyon], 12 and 37 respectively.

¹⁹ See [Barrett and Kenyon], and Morphy, above. Philip Jones, 'Perceptions of Aboriginal art: A history', in Peter Sutton, ed., *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia*, New York: Viking in association with The Asia Society Galleries, 1988, 143-79.

their collection, is not enough. Given that the story comes towards the very end of the book, I would have liked to see Lowish argue for the merits and flaws of the display that presumably sought to show historical and contemporary knowledge of the field. It is important to grapple with these problems because it would be naïve to assume art history did not have similar blind spots. Might the reticence felt throughout the book reflect its distant origins as a dissertation, a fact that would also explain the many wayfinding cues throughout the text?

Secondly, I was dismayed to read on p. 9: 'That no art historian, as opposed to sociologist or anthropologist, had produced a monograph on an Indigenous artist in Australia prior to Ian McLean's *The Art of Gordon Bennett* (1996) suggests that the discipline is either slow to accept the idea of individual Indigenous artists or has not considered 'Aboriginal art' to be an appropriate area of study'. On one level I could cite any number of books by art writers (if not strictly art historians) who wrote monographs on Aboriginal artists before 1996, but on another level I was disappointed to see that a Vasarian-styled monograph might be seen as the epitome of art historical scholarship on Aboriginal art. Not every serious art historian interested in Aboriginal art aspires to write a monograph on an artist.

Thirdly, there were a few production oversights – the occasional typographic error, unexplained change of font, omissions from the otherwise-fulsome bibliography and index, etc – that most of us fail to detect when too close to a text. Also, the decision to omit an author's first name on second and subsequent occasions is in principle sensible though I was sometimes momentarily lost, wondering which Spencer, Smith or Jones was under discussion.

Overall, however, I believe the book will be valued by scholars of Aboriginal art, Aboriginal studies, Australian art history, the history and philosophy of science, and art historiography. The breadth of sources and the defined focus of the study do indeed allow for a rethinking of Australia's art history. May it stimulate more research into the period from 1788 to 1929, challenge and refine current cannons on Aboriginal art, and provoke a lively debate within art history!

Catherine De Lorenzo - is an art historian whose publications in Australian art and photo history engage with cross-cultural and cross disciplinary issues. She is currently Honorary A/Professor at UNSW Art & Design, University of New South Wales, Sydney, and Adjunct A/Professor at Monash Art Design and Architecture, Melbourne. With Joanna Mendelssohn, Alison Inglis and Catherine Speck she recently co-authored *Australian art exhibitions: Opening our eyes* (Thames & Hudson, 2018), on the impact of curatorial strategies on Australian art history since 1960.

catherine.delorenzo@gmail.com



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